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Perpetuating the Architecture of Separation: An Analysis of the Presentation of History at Riversdale House Museum in Riverdale Park, Maryland

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Abstract: Riversdale House Museum is one of many historic houses in the United States with difficult histories, which curators avoid rather than confront. This evasive tactic goes against recent developments in museological method and theory that advocate for social justice as one of a museum's primary goals. Exhibits at Riversdale focus on architectural restoration and avoid an overt discussion of many aspects of history unrelated to aesthetics. The presentation of history at this site, in the context of a diverse community, is also at odds with recently developed interpretation methods at historic houses that emphasize connection with a museum's community and audience. This paper discusses ways that historic sites avoid difficult histories and the nature of the separations that exhibits create. In addition, this paper delves into Riversdale's exhibitry and examines the presentation of history by curators at the site. The results of this study critique historic interpretation at Riversdale House Museum and make recommendations to foster multivocality and include the voices of slaves and servants.

Keywords: Museums, slavery, history, exhibits

Introduction

Throughout the United States, there are many historic houses with histories that contain racial, economic, and gender inequality and injustice. Riversdale House Museum, located in Riverdale Park in Prince George's County, Maryland, is one such place. In the mid-1800s Riversdale was the main house on a large plantation that covered 2,000 acres. Over the last half-century, the neighborhood around the museum has transformed into a predominantly Latino and African American, low- to middle-income neighborhood. From its opening in 1993 to present (2018), exhibits at the museum have primarily focused on the lives of the Calvert family who resided there, and restorations focus on recreat-

ing the architecture and furnishings as they would have been from 1810-20. Beyond the story of the family of Adam Francis Plummer, a slave at the plantation, exhibits at Riversdale House Museum fail to represent the voices of poor, servant, and enslaved African American populations. In addition, the segregated nature of the exhibitry and the contrasting methods of presentation encourage emersion and empathy for the aristocratic family, while developing an overly positive narrative about the enslaved family. Other text presented at the museum fails to directly confront some of the realities of slavery including forced sexual relations, which is part of the Calvert families' history. Although it is laudable that the narrative focuses on the life of a woman, the portrayal of Rosalie Calvert at Riversdale limits the breadth of her character and accomplishments by neglecting to incorporate many important non-domestic aspects of her life.

In committing to a certain storyline and focusing on architectural restoration, Riversdale continues an unfortunate tradition in historic house museums in the United States, where the history of wealthy White Americans is prioritized over that of the poor, minorities, and especially, slaves. Presentations of history at this site also recreate segregation by separating White and African American life stories based on colonial racial divisions. In addition, the exhibits at this site perpetuate the idea that there is one history to be told and ignore the multivocality inherent in archaeological and historical interpretation. This paper examines the history of Riversdale House Museum in the context of the modern community and discusses the parts of history that are selected when developing narratives in historic houses throughout the United States. In addition, this paper demonstrates that these narratives, the layout of exhibits, and other aspects of the museum sustain colonial inequality and that curators actively choose which histories to represent. Finally, this paper will propose changes to the museum that incorporate the lives and stories of a more diverse segment of the people who lived at Riversdale Mansion and confront the difficult history of this historic house.

Theoretical Background

The introduction of the new museology in the 1970s called for a change in the approach to exhibition, history, com-

munity outreach, education, and curatorship in museums worldwide (Bal 1996; Ross 2004; Stam 1993). In subsequent decades, many of those working in museology have expanded the definition and potential of a museum for engaging with its local community. One of the most influential essays on the role of museums is James Clifford's, "Museums as Contact Zones," in which a *contact zone* is defined as a "space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations" (1997, 192). While this was originally applied to unequal power relations in colonial contexts, the concept can be used to connect communities in parts of the United States where separations are formed by the nature of historical relationships. In this context, the artifacts exhibited in a museum are *contact zones* that provide information about past interactions and can be an impetus for new relationships within and between community members and groups (Peers and Brown 2003, 5). The relationship between visitors and museums has also transformed into an interactive relationship rather than museums simply dictating to their audiences (Perin 1992). This is because the relationship between the museum and its visitors defines both the museum's purpose and its value (Newman and McLean 2002). Once the relationship between a museum and its visitors is established, the museum contributes to and facilitates the reconstruction of its users' identities and may impel them toward social action (Newman and McLean 2002).

Expanding on a museum's ability to influence its visitors toward social action is the idea of museums for social justice, which calls for the involvement of the public in creating museum content and requires the regular change and renewal of that content (Fleming 2013). While some question the necessity of utilizing museums for a purpose beyond entertainment and education, confronting difficult histories is important for several reasons. Encountering and experiencing difficult history builds empathy, establishes the importance of human rights, and demonstrates our common humanity (Golding 2013; Rose 2016). While encountering past atrocities can trigger grief, stress, and anxiety, this dialogue creates an opportunity to identify, examine, and act against modern oppression and marginalization (Rose 2016). In these cases, connections established between the museum and an individual's life experiences help communities to take responsibility for ongoing issues like racism (Golding 2013). These con-

cepts are particularly important in the context of historic house museums, especially those with complex histories rife with inequality and injustice.

Background and History of Riversdale

The architecture of Riversdale Mansion combines Georgian and Federalist styles. The most distinctive aspect of the architecture is the Palladian five-part symmetry consisting of a central block and two identical wings connected to the main house by short passageways called hyphens (Riversdale 2018) (Figure 1). The European-style stuccoed exterior sets it apart from red brick construction, which is more typical of the United States. Because of this, the house was considered exotic by Washington D.C. society in its day (Callcott 1991). Docents who lead tours of the site will point to its deceptive façade: the windows are symmetrical on the exterior while the rooms on the interior are not. In the first-floor office, windows continue into the coachman's room above, leaving gaps between the ceiling and wall to maintain this exterior symmetry. The west wing of the house was used as a coach house with the entry hidden on the side to maintain an exterior appearance of both wealth and symmetry. Docents at the house describe the importance of maintaining this veneer of aristocracy despite the fact that the Calvert family struggled with failed crops and war-related trade restrictions for two decades.

The history depicted at the house utilizes the letters of Rosalie Calvert (nee Stier), which were recovered from a family home in Belgium. Rosalie was descended from European nobility and married George Calvert, an American and a descendant of the Fifth Lord Baltimore. At Riversdale House Museum, docents recreate the home as it would have been in the 1810s, when Rosalie and George lived at the house with their nine children. The author toured Riversdale House Museum five times individually with a different docent each time. Three visits took place in the spring of 2006 and an additional two visits occurred on April 10, and 15, 2018. Docents lived in the Washington Metropolitan Area and varied in background from an art history MA to individuals with interest in living history and reenactment. The following two paragraphs provide a summary of the history of Riversdale as presented by docents to visitors at the house.

Rosalie Stier was sixteen in 1794 when her family left Belgium for the United States, fleeing the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror (Callcott 1991). The Stier family travelled from Europe to Philadelphia, then Annapolis, and finally to Bladensburg, Maryland. In 1796 Rosalie married George Calvert, an illegitimate descendant of the Fifth Lord Baltimore and founder of Maryland. At the time, the prospect of the family returning to Europe was tenuous. In 1800 Rosalie's father, Henri Stier purchased land and commissioned an architect to design a home for the family (National Park Service, 1990) (Figure 2, Figure 1). Construction of the house began in 1801, but one year after moving into the unfinished mansion, most of the family returned to Belgium, motivated by increased safety for aristocrats and threats to confiscate their European holdings by the Napoleonic regime (Riversdale 2018). At this point, Rosalie and George Calvert moved into Riversdale and completed construction of the house in 1807 (Callcott 1991). The couple remained at Riversdale and Rosalie eventually obtained the title to the property after becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen.

The Stier family remained in Europe after their return and Rosalie never traveled to Belgium. When she died in 1821, control of her assets was left to George Calvert and by 1828, he was the wealthiest man in Prince George's County, worth an estimated \$53,762 (National Park Service 1990). When George died in 1838, the home and property passed to the Calvert sons, George and Charles. The latter was responsible for the founding and sale of land to create the Maryland College of Agriculture, which became the University of Maryland (UMD). Between 1887 and 1949 the area around the mansion was transformed into subdivisions and the estate passed through the hands of several owners until only the original main structure and one dependency on four acres of land remained in what had become a residential suburb of Washington, D.C.

Riversdale Mansion and four acres of land were purchased by the Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) in 1949 (Miller and Ferguson 1996). The space was used as an administrative headquarter until 1976 when the M-NCPPC created a new history division headquartered at Riversdale (Miller and Ferguson 1996). In the 1980s, the Riversdale Historical Society learned about the discovery of letters written by Rosalie Calvert to her family in Belgium while

she was living in Maryland (Riversdale 2006). These letters were translated and compiled into the book, *Mistress of Riversdale: The Plantation Letters of Rosalie Stier Calvert, 1791-1821* by Margaret Law Callcott with the help of the historical society (1991). By 1990, funding had reached a sufficient level and plans for the restoration had been developed over a three-year period based on the wealth of historical documents (Miller and Ferguson 1996). Riversdale House Museum opened for tours in June of 1993 and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1997 (Riversdale 2006) (Figure 2). In June of 2007, an office and interpretive center were added to the property (Riversdale 2018).

Riversdale House Museum: Current Exhibits

As of 2018, a tour of the current Riversdale House Museum begins at the interpretive center adjacent to the parking lot. The exhibits in this building are heavily text-dependent with panels devoted to major events related to the house and the region. These include the Stier and Calvert families, the family of Adam Francis Plummer, the first pilgrims to Maryland, the war of 1812, the construction of the nearby railroad, and the founding of the Maryland College of Agriculture. In this exhibit, the docent orients visitors to the house by providing the history of the first family to live there, using a family tree on the wall as a visual reference (Figure 3). Next visitors are directed to the main doors of the house where they are greeted by a second docent as if they were visiting the house in the early 1800s.

The tour of the house begins with the main exhibit which is based on letters written by Rosalie Calvert while she lived there. These letters, combined with other methods, are a reference for architectural restorations at Riversdale. The main exhibit focuses on architecture, art history, and the daily activities of the Calvert family. The emphasis on art history comes from the fact that the Stier collection of paintings by influential European artists was stored in the house from 1801-1816 (Callcott 1991). Each room contains one small descriptive plaque, many of which include excerpts from letters that frequently reference the interior decoration of the house. Rooms on the first floor include a hall, salon (Figure 4), formal dining room, parlor, George Calvert's office, the butler's pantry, and two unrestored areas used for events. One of these rooms displays reproductions of paintings of

the Lords of Baltimore from whom George Calvert was descended. This room was formerly a carriage house, although it was disguised by the façade of the house as mentioned previously (Callcott, 1991; Riversdale 2018). The other unrestored room on the opposite end of the house was originally two rooms: a private sitting room for the family and a kitchen. There are also the remnants of a slave and servant staircase, with a plaque at the base where part of it is still intact.

The upstairs includes a “best guest room”, an additional guest room, the master bedroom, small rooms for the two eldest children, a closet, and a nursery. The second guest room houses temporary exhibits, which are often inspired by staff and docent interests and rotate frequently. Some past temporary exhibits include: nineteenth century chairs, nineteenth century dresses, the family and descendants of Adam Francis Plummer, and antique clocks. Another room, where the coachman, Will Scott lived, focuses on Hattie Caraway, a senator from Arkansas who owned Riversdale in the 1920s and was the first woman to serve a full term in the U.S. Senate. An additional room that may have been occupied by servants or slaves is left empty because the letters written by Rosalie do not mention its use (Riversdale 2006, 2018). Interpretive text in the permanent exhibits in the main house includes eleven descriptive plaques on the first floor and six on the second floor.

One dependency has survived to the east of the mansion, although foundations of other buildings on the property were discovered through archaeological survey. This two-story building is divided in half, with a ladder leading to a sleeping loft in the middle. One side contains a functional early 1800s kitchen, which is used for cooking demonstrations. The other half of the building focuses on Adam Francis Plummer, an African American man who was born on a different plantation and brought to Riversdale by George Calvert in 1829 (Plummer 1927). This exhibit is heavily text-dependent with lengthy panels that describe the Plummer family history. According to the text, Adam and the younger Calvert son, Charles, established a strong working relationship and friendship and shared a love of agriculture (Riversdale 2018). Adam learned to read and write from a preacher and kept a diary beginning in 1839, when he met Emily Saunders, a slave at another plantation (Plummer 1927). Parts of the diary were transcribed by a descendant, Nellie Plummer, in

Out of the Depths or The Triumph of the Cross, 1927. This book chronicles the family, beginning with Adam and Emily's secret marriage and the eventual discovery of their union, an event which led to the separation of the couple and the diaspora of their children (Riversdale 2018). The family were reunited following the emancipation of Maryland slaves in 1864 (Plummer 1927). Adam continued to work at Riversdale after he was manumitted, and the Plummer family moved to a nearby home (Riversdale 2018).

Returning to the main building, the tour of Riversdale House Museum moves to the basement, which includes a wine cellar, dairy, reception area, a room with kitchen objects and information about other historical sites in the area, and a gift shop. The reception area includes a model of an octagonal barn in the style of one located at Mt. Vernon in Virginia. Outside of the mansion and near the dependency there is a vegetable and herb garden, the products of which are used in the demonstration kitchen. There is also a flower garden with interpretive labels. A cannon from the Ark and the Dove, the first ships to bring colonists to Maryland, was gifted to Henri Stier and sits behind the house (Riversdale 2018).

Museum Status, Employees, Archaeology, and Outreach

Riversdale House Museum is supported by the M-NCPPC through property tax revenue from Prince George's County, where it is located, and Montgomery County, which is adjacent to Prince George's County (Riversdale 2018). In exchange for this support, the museum provides discounts to residents of these two counties. The M-NCPPC has several divisions including an archaeological unit that surveys, excavates, and performs restoration investigations at Riversdale (Riversdale 2006). Surveys and excavations were conducted at the site in 1988, 1989, 1991-1993, 1997, 2000, and 2001 (Riversdale 2018). In addition, students from the UMD Historic Preservation Program participated in restoration focused investigations in 2010 (Riversdale 2018). The Riverdale Historical Society, which holds a non-profit 501 C3 status, collaborates with the M-NCPPC to curate the collection and continues architectural restorations at the house as funding becomes available (Riversdale 2018). Museum collections are stored on-site and in a nearby

residential property, which is also owned by the M-NCPPC (Riverdale 2018).

The museum is staffed by two full-time employees: a director and a historian (Riversdale 2018). The remaining nine employees are part-time; these positions include education coordinator and assistant, gardener, collections manager, and five managers who provide tours and organize over fifty volunteers (Riversdale 2018). Most volunteers act as docents and are members of the Riversdale Historical Society (Riversdale 2018). The historical society has 394 active members and holds four positions: president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary (Riversdale 2018).

Riversdale hosts both interpretive programming and non-historical events at the site. In 2017 there were 26 interpretive events with 806 guests and 13 non-historic events with 1607 guests (Riversdale 2018). Examples of events from the 2018 calendar year include *Tasting the Past: Dining with Jane Austen*, *The Enslaved and Hired Workers at Riversdale Tour*, *Tavern Night*, and *A Bath Afternoon*, focusing on the English spa city (M-NCPPC 2018) which Rosalie mentions in her letters (Callcott 1991). The museum also hosts private events, which support the restoration and maintenance of the property. There are also free events on the museum grounds, which are hosted in collaboration with the town of Riverdale Park (Riversdale 2018).

The museum offers guided tours and workshops for school groups, but their limited capacity of 50 students per tour restricts access (Riversdale 2018). In 2017, there were 36 tours with a total of 950 students who visited the site (Riversdale 2018). There are four standardized tours with accompanying teacher information packets available for pre-college students which meet state educational standards. These include *Pinch, No Smiles: Early Nineteenth Century Play at Riversdale*, *Out of the Shadows: Riversdale's Servants in the Spotlight*, *What's Cooking: 19th Century Foodways*, and *Sensing the Past* (M-NCPPC 2018). There are also programs geared specifically toward Girl Scouts that range from historic to general (M-NCPPC 2018). College classes, primarily from UMD, also visit the museum, and in 2017, 12 classes with 264 students came to the site (Riversdale 2018).

Representation at Riversdale House Museum

The way in which history is presented at Riversdale House Museum is problematic for many reasons, especially considering changes in attitudes within the museological community over the past few decades. The museum might be excused for taking an exclusively historical approach to the portrayal of life at Riversdale were it not for numerous surveys and excavations over the years. In addition, a thorough reading of the source material found in Callcott's 1991 publication, *Mistress of Riversdale*, shows that curators have selectively chosen which aspects of history to exhibit at the house and that there are many opportunities to exhibit multivocality at the site. Instead of developing narratives that focus on difficult aspects of the past, the museum presents the stories of White and African American lives in a way that is divided based on colonial racial separation. Throughout the museum, the accuracy of architectural restoration and recreation of great works of art stand in stark contrast to the realities of life as a slave, servant, or woman at a plantation house in the 1810s.

For curators working at museums, expressions of what is "real" or "true" are not expressions of fact or replications of history (Gable, Handler, and Lawson 1992). In fact, a complete picture of what happened at such sites from the perspective of every inhabitant would be impossible to recreate (Gable, Handler, and Lawson 1992). That said, there are many opportunities to exhibit a more diverse story than the main narrative, which is the focus of Riversdale House Museum. It is also important to establish the agency of the curators since "writing history or 'doing' it in a museum involves active choices on their [the curators] part- not merely judgements as to the reliability and significance of the evidence, but the selection of particular facts in order to tell a particular story with a purpose" (Gable, Handler, and Lawson 1992, 795). The curators at Riversdale, like other historic sites, are selectively choosing which stories to investigate and exhibit and are limited by the perspective(s) from which they tell these stories.

Of the many problematic aspects of the presentation of history at Riversdale House Museum, the greatest issue is the perpetuation and creation of divisions between the lives of the under and upper-class inhabitants. This division is best demonstrated by the separation between exhibits about the Calverts in

the main house and the Plummer family in the dependency. This relegation to an exterior building without climate control means that exhibits in the dependency are entirely text-based, in contrast to the main house, which relies primarily on artifacts. These two methods of exhibitry create an experience of immersion into aristocratic life which contrasts with the textbook-style education about African Americans and slavery. In doing so, the development of an emotional connection with and empathy for the former is much more accessible than with and for the latter. The only text to directly mention slaves or servants within the main house exhibit is the panel at the foot of the remnant of the slave and servant staircase. In addition, within the dependency exhibit, the inherently hegemonic relationship between Charles Calvert, the owner, and Adam Francis Plummer, the slave, is extolled. Other mentions of slaves and servants are not present in the main exhibit and the responsibility for their inclusion is left to individual docents.

The invisibility of the lower-class is further indicated by the use of double-speak and third-person references to the products of slave labor. In historic house museums, double-speak refers to the disguising of unpleasant topics like slavery through the use of general terms like “other” or “servant” (McGill 2005). Third-person references are also ways to dress slavery in a false veneer. They appear in references to the construction of the house by “builders” or “workers” rather than stating that large parts of Riversdale were built and improved by slave labor. In the basement dairy, a quote from one of Rosalie’s letters about the butter she makes and sells includes interpretive text which notes that she did not actually make the butter herself. However, the positives of this caveat are downplayed through use of the term “other,” rather than slave or servant, to reference who actually made the butter (Figure 5). Referring to slaves as servants or lumping servants and slaves together in the category of servant is a form of double-speak that is prevalent and extends to school programing, where one of the field trip options entitled, *Out of the Shadows: Riversdale’s Servants in the Spotlight*, is actually about both slaves and servants. By using the term servant to describe a mixed group of slaves and servants, the museum ignores the realities of the site’s past. Since there is minimal interpretive text in the main exhibit, the required accompaniment of a docent prioritizes the language of the guide over any other way of un-

derstanding the house. On five tours of Riversdale, with different individuals as guides, the use of third-person references to the products of slave labor was common on four (Riversdale 2006, 2018). This is particularly important because docents, acting as spokespersons for historic houses often create *affective inequality* by emphasizing emotional connections to the wealthy planter class over the slave and servant classes (Modlin et al. 2007).

The separation between the products of slave labor and the individuals who performed the actual work points to another way in which exhibit narratives separate poor minorities from the White upper-class. One specific context is the butler's pantry, where flatware and other valuable domestic items were stored. In this case the separation is created by the concept of ownership, since these objects belonged to the Calverts. However, practical realities like the fact that the dishes were washed, and their contents prepared by people who worked at Riversdale shows that actual interaction with the objects was distributed between upper- and lower-class members. In this and many other cases, curators at Riversdale could use this space, where multiple perspectives coexist, to exhibit the underclass in the museum (Phillips 2003). There is also an opportunity to use components of the museum collections as contact zones since their shared usage is part of interactions between people with hegemonic relationships (Clifford 1997). This further extends to the nursery, where childcare, production of clothing, and other aspects of daily life were shared between slaves, servants, and masters.

The valuation of one person's interaction with an object over another's results in greater visibility of aristocratic lives. This concept is discussed at many U.S. historic sites where there is a lack of information about what Colonial Williamsburg has termed, the other half (Gable, Handler, and Lawson 1992). This stems from the 2,000-person population at Williamsburg, which consisted of half slaves and half free people during the period that the site recreates (Gable, Handler, and Lawson 1992). In lieu of information about slaves, curators at the site initially avoided representations of things they had no evidence for and verbally communicated this to audiences. At Riversdale, this is a common practice and is best exemplified by a small empty room on the second floor that is unfurnished. On five separate visits the static rhetoric of guides reaffirmed this invisibility in stating that this

room probably housed a slave or servant but is not mentioned in Rosalie's letters (Riversdale 2006, 2018). In contrast to this, a display in the basement includes a model of an octagonal barn based on the one built by George Washington at Mt. Vernon. Here docents explain the model by stating that there is a possibility, based on historical documents, that there was an octagonal barn at Riversdale. Here the docents and exhibitry demonstrate that while curators are comfortable with imaginative stand-ins for aspects of aristocratic life, they are unwilling to make the same effort regarding the lives of slaves and servants.

While Riversdale House Museum focuses on the story of White, aristocratic inhabitants, there are laudable aspects of exhibits at the house. First, due to the preponderance of primary source material from the perspective of Rosalie Calvert, the narrative focuses on a woman's perspective. Second, although slavery is not a primary subject, it is mentioned in one interpretive panel in the house, and was the focus of one public event, a temporary exhibit, and an educational program in the 2018 calendar. Third, in most cases Riversdale avoids the "doll house" experience, which is common in historic houses, where visitors peer into rooms that they cannot physically enter (Vagnone et al. 2015). In addition, the dependency exhibit, which focuses on the life of Adam Francis Plummer and his family, includes an exceptional amount of information about a man who was a slave. Despite some positive qualities, there are many aspects of even the most primary-source-based portrayal of life at Riversdale House Museum, which lack historical accuracy. The current exhibit in the main house and the way that it is presented connote aristocracy, though Rosalie lacked a house keeper and the family lived frugally by her standards. During her time at Riversdale, crops failed, could not be sold due to trade restrictions, and were confiscated during war. Although the family had luxuries, they made and grew a great deal of what they needed and received many gifts from Rosalie's family in Europe. Another issue is the primarily noble portrayal of George Calvert. Although his actions were typical of the time, the fact that he accrued most of his substantial wealth and holdings after Rosalie's death using capital that legally belonged to their children is not mentioned in exhibits at Riversdale (Callcott 1991). In addition, his concubine, Eleanor Beckett, and their children are mentioned briefly in the visitors' center (Figure 3), but forced sexual relations are

never directly discussed. On all five visits to the site, docents mentioned his other family in a hushed tone and without naming Eleanor (Riversdale 2006, 2018). The diary of Adam Francis Plummer also reveals that George Calvert had one additional family with another female slave (Plummer 1927), and this is alluded to by some docents but not mentioned in exhibits at the house.

The way in which the exhibit at Riversdale is presented belies remarkable aspects of Rosalie Calvert. In addition to managing the household, Rosalie handled her European families' investments in the United States, managing a considerable amount of money, which was uncommon for a woman at the time (Callcott 1991). The fact that Rosalie's father transferred ownership of Riversdale directly to her further demonstrates the progressive attitude of her family (Callcott 1991). Exhibits at Riversdale gloss over this aspect of Rosalie in favor of a focus on interior decoration. In fact, Rosalie was a product of a unique time in pre-industrial Western history when wealthy women's educations were superior to the periods before and after it (Callcott 1991). This level of education is demonstrated by political commentary in her letters and her investment in the education of her daughters (Callcott 1991).

The inaccessibility of exhibits and programs relating to slaves and servants is another problematic aspect of Riversdale. One example is the temporary exhibit about the Plummer family, which was located in the main house during Black History Month in 2018. This was followed by an exhibit about antique clocks, which was unrelated to the house, yet lasted three times longer. Visitor surveys at Mt. Vernon from an unpublished master's thesis found that guests who went on the seasonally available "Slave Life" tour were less likely to think that George Washington and his family "performed most of the labor at Mount Vernon" (McGill 2005:37). Correlations were also found among people who went on the slave life tour and disagreed with the statement, "Slaves at Mount Vernon were treated humanely" (McGill 2005:38). In addition, when asked about the number of African American versus the number of White people living at the plantation, the conflation of the actual percentages by a large number of visitors (McGill 2005:50) shows that even when historic houses include representations of African American populations, the perception that visitors take with them is a di-

rect reflection of what and who they see at the site. This accessibility relates directly to the idea of affective empathy since “the presence of such affective inequality has the dangerous potential to reaffirm the marginality of the enslaved” (Modlin et al. 2007, 9). The aforementioned preliminary findings from visitor surveys show that a one-month exhibit about an African American family in honor of Black History Month and a biannual tour, *The Enslaved and Hired Workers at Riversdale* (M-NCPPC 2018) do not effectively convey the history of Riversdale. These slave- and underclass-centered exhibits and tours must be made available throughout the year to accurately represent the array of lives at Riversdale. This problem also occurred at Colonial Williamsburg when the site introduced African American actors in their living history exhibits beginning in 1977 (Gable, Handler, and Lawson 1992). This is because only a few reenactors were employed to represent the African American half of the population. At Riversdale, recently discovered tax records reveal that the population of African Americans at the site was more than double that of the White population (Riversdale 2018).

Another issue at Riversdale is its failure to reflect the transformation of the surrounding community. While upon its inception, Riverdale Park was a subdivision of primarily White, middle-class families, the majority of its current residents are Latino and African American (US Census, 2010) (Figure 6). Current exhibits and outreach conducted by the museum are small measures, but they are insufficient in terms of diminishing the plantation house dichotomy created by the gated grounds of the house, which creates a visual and symbolic separation from the local community. In addition, on all five visits to the site, all employees and volunteers were White. Inclusion of local community members is an important component of recent museological method and theory that Riversdale House Museum has not responded to. The dearth of African American employees and volunteers is especially problematic considering that Prince George’s County is almost two-thirds African American (US Census 2010) (Figure 7).

Proposed Changes to the Museum

There are a number of changes to Riversdale House Museum that would incorporate additional voices into the existing exhibits without requiring a complete restructuring of the site.

One of the most obvious examples is the way visitors are directed to enter the house: docents receive them as they would have been received by Rosalie in the early 1800s. This form of entry restricts visitor thinking by mimicking the way in which wealthy, White people would have entered the house and precludes a connection to the site's slave and servant inhabitants.

The main critique of the site is the arbitrary architectural separation between exhibits regarding the wealthy White populations and the enslaved and servant population that lived there. Current exhibits in the main house primarily focus on the aristocrats while the exhibits in the surviving dependency, which was not actually occupied by slaves, focus on the Plummer family. This separation, the use of Adam Plummer as a representative of African Americans at Riversdale, and the focus on his positive relationship with his owners ignores the realities of slavery. In fact, the slaves and servants at Riversdale differed in background, title, treatment, education, and contact with each other, the Calvert family, and the outside world. In addition, some slaves and servants lived and worked in the main house and were extensions of the Calvert household.

Based on this discussion, one change would be to include exhibits about the underclass in areas of the main house. One option is the empty room on the second floor, which was most likely occupied by a slave or servant (Riversdale 2006, 2018). There are many choices in terms of the individual(s) to focus on for this exhibit because the previously mentioned listing of George Calvert's property from the early nineteenth century includes the names and occupations of the enslaved population that lived at Riversdale (Riversdale 2018). This information, combined with a restudy of existing records including Rosalie's letters and other primary sources could provide information regarding the slaves and servants at Riversdale. For example, there are five mentions in the letters of a female slave named Lucie who travelled with the Stier family to Europe and was entrusted with important documents when she returned to Riversdale (Callcott 1991:61). Upon her return, Lucie was a chambermaid at the house and was later sold by the Calverts (Callcott 1991:85). This is one small example, but it should be noted that curators at Colonial Williamsburg found that once they began to look for information about the enslaved people who lived there, they found more than sufficient content for exhibits within overlooked parts

of previously examined historical sources (Gable, Handler, and Lawson 1992).

Another important addition to current exhibits would be to open two areas that are currently closed to the public. The first is the east wing second floor mezzanine, which is not part of the normal tour but was shown by one docent in 2006 (Riversdale). This area is partly restored and contains rooms where servants and slaves probably carried out tasks and possibly lived. The other area is the basement, which has several rooms that are currently closed, as well as a sprawling gift shop that could be consolidated to provide more exhibit space. This area could become an exhibit about the lives of slaves and servants (Callcott 1991).

The preceding avenue of discussion opens doors to other possibilities at Riversdale, which include changes to programing inspired by the previously mentioned concept of "contact zones." One such change would be to reorient the tours for both children and adults that focus on enslaved individuals and servants. By incorporating passages from the letters related to servant/slave interactions with the Calvert family, these tours could become opportunities for the investigation of unequal power relationships at the site. An additional expression of this interaction would be to create an exhibit that focuses on George Calvert's second family and his concubine, Eleanor Beckett. While this second family is included in the family tree at the interpretive center (Figure 3) and mentioned by docents, they are not discussed in interpretive panels in the house. Since information about their manumission is available, a more substantive discussion of the realities of master-female slave relationships would help to interrupt the façade created by the current main exhibit.

In a similar vein, Rosalie's letters describe several slave habitations on the property that were designed to look like European peasant's shacks and one that she hoped to build (it is unclear from the letters whether it was ever built) to look like a Greco-Roman temple (Callcott 1991). A model of these homes along with a written accompaniment contrasting their interiors and exteriors would provide an opportunity to develop empathy for slaves at Riversdale. The fact that these structures would have contributed to the separation between exterior and interior architecture and appearances at the site also makes them an important component of history to exhibit (Callcott 1991). Contrasting these realities is the fact that docents downplay Rosalie's

comfortability with slavery, while the language used in her letters (Callcott 1991) indicates that she accepted and participated in this institution.

The visitor center, which is the introduction to the museum, could also include other historic events such as the 1864 emancipation of slaves in Maryland, women's suffrage in Maryland, and the admission of the first African American student at UMD in 1951 (UMD College Park 2018). Another aspect of the visitor's center that could be improved is a reduction in text-based exhibits and the incorporation of more artifacts. In addition, the shift of temporary exhibits from the house to the visitor center would provide greater access to these exhibits (the visitors center is open daily while house tours are available two days each week) and facilitate the inclusion of slave and servant lives within the structure of the main exhibit in the house.

On the most recent visit to Riversdale, in April of 2018, a docent described the yearly reunion for the descendants of Adam Francis Plummer hosted on the grounds of the museum. Although it is creditable that the museum has facilitated the reunion of people descended from slaves who lived at Riversdale, there is a missed opportunity here. This yearly reunion could be part of an exhibit that demonstrates the positive impact of historic houses when they are willing to incorporate slaves' lives into their exhibitry. In addition, inviting descendant family members to join the board or participate in the development of exhibits would be a direct expression of the power of museums to perform social activism rather than adhering to the status quo. There is also the possibility that descendants of the Calvert and Plummer families could meet at Riversdale and develop an exhibit together. By doing so, the museum could reunify these two families and present a more rounded portrayal of history at the site.

Riversdale House Museum is a monument to many things and is emblematic to many Marylanders as a location of historical interest. Its primary goal of document- and archaeologically-based historical restoration is certainly achieved with great success. However, in light of museological trends and the demographic changes in the community, Riversdale curators must renew their exhibit content. Rather than separating the disgraceful past of the site from the romantic invention of "history" in the main house, curators should focus on the authenticity of

life over the authenticity of aesthetics.

The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience espouses “the principle that there is immense power in historic spaces, power that drives visitors to connect not only intellectually, but also emotionally and spiritually with stories of the past” (Pharaon et al. 2015, 71). One example of a museum using its power as a historic place to develop an emotional connection with the past, is the recent unveiling of exhibits at Monticello that focuses on Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson’s concubine with whom he had six children (Nelson 2018). Here curators restored the space where she lived, which had been made into a visitor bathroom, to its original use (Nelson 2018). In addition, curators connected with their descendants and created an exhibit that attempts to decipher the reality of Hemings relationship with Jefferson (Nelson 2018). These exhibits further demonstrate that the racial dichotomy imposed by the separation of White and African American histories is itself an artificial division. This is because of the massive number of children with white ancestry who were produced through forced sexual relations and treated as slaves. Through community collaboration and creative curatorship, Riversdale House Museum can follow Monticello’s example and acknowledge its difficult history. Another example of confronting history is at *Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration*, which opened this year in Montgomery, Alabama on the site of a warehouse where slaves were once housed. A quote from Maya Angelou on its facade reads, “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced again with courage need not be lived again” (Flood 2018). With an agenda focused on social justice, Riversdale House Museum can recognize its own perpetuation of separation and exhibit a difficult and inclusive history rather than relegating it to docent asides and dependency buildings.

Notes

A note of clarification for readers: The museum and original house are called Riversdale, the town where they are located is known as Riverdale Park.

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Appendix I

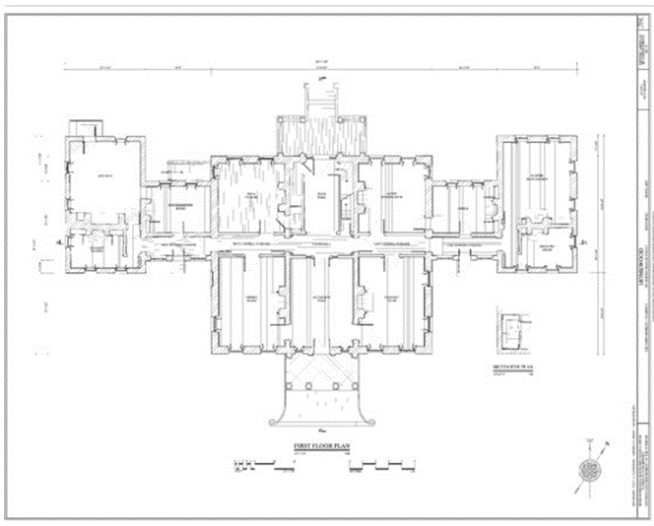


Figure 1: Architectural plan for the first floor of Riversdale Mansion (After National Park Service, 1990).



Figure 2: Riversdale House Museum in 2018, the dependency is on the left behind a tree (Photograph by author).

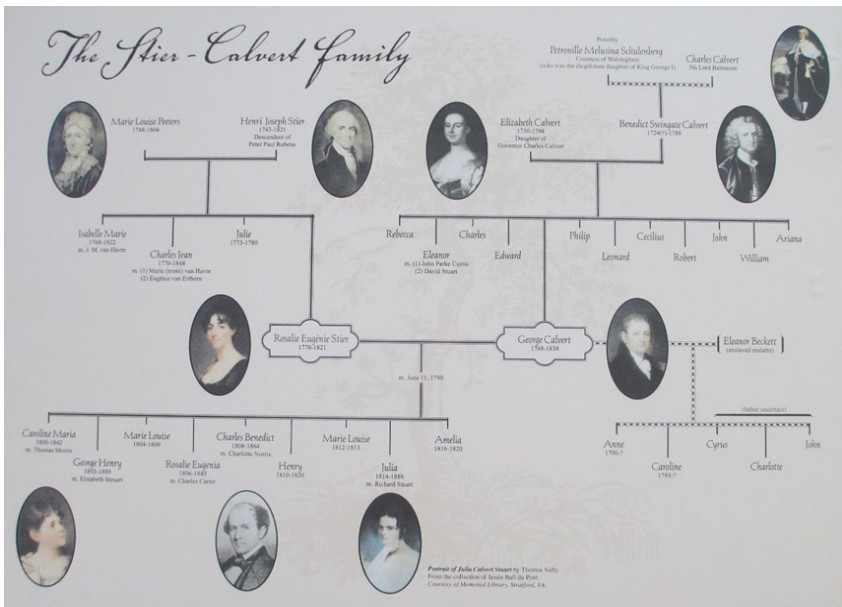


Figure 3: The families of Rosalie and George Calvert (Photograph of exhibit panel at Riversdale House Museum taken by author, April 15, 2018).



Figure 4: View from the hall to the newly restored salon at Riversdale (left) (Photograph by the author) and closeup of the restored grapevine architectural detail, which demonstrates the focus on architectural restoration (right) (After Riversdale House Museum Facebook Post, June 3, 2018).

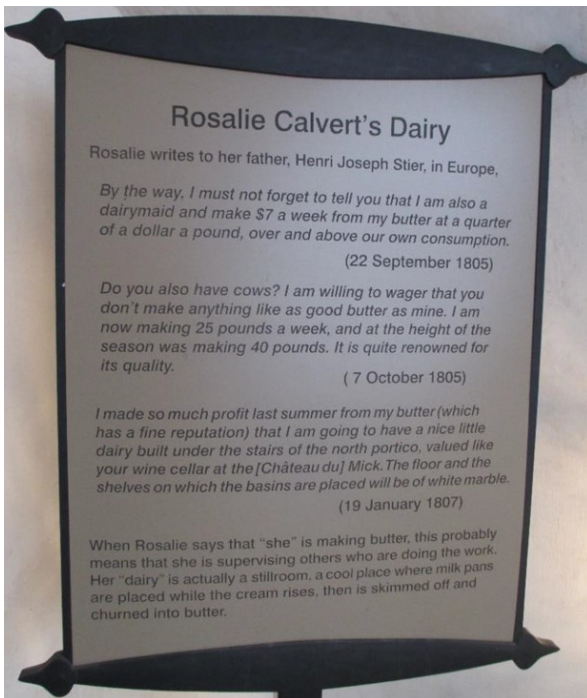


Figure 5: Signage at Riversdale. In the second line of the fourth paragraph “other” is used to refer to servants and slaves (Photograph of Exhibit Panel at Riversdale House Museum taken by the author, April 15, 2018).

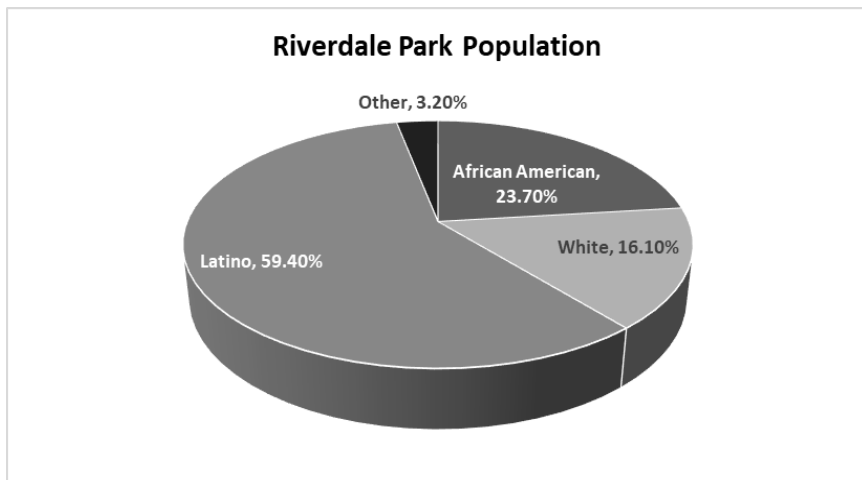


Figure 6: Riverdale Park Population Demographics (United States Census 2010).

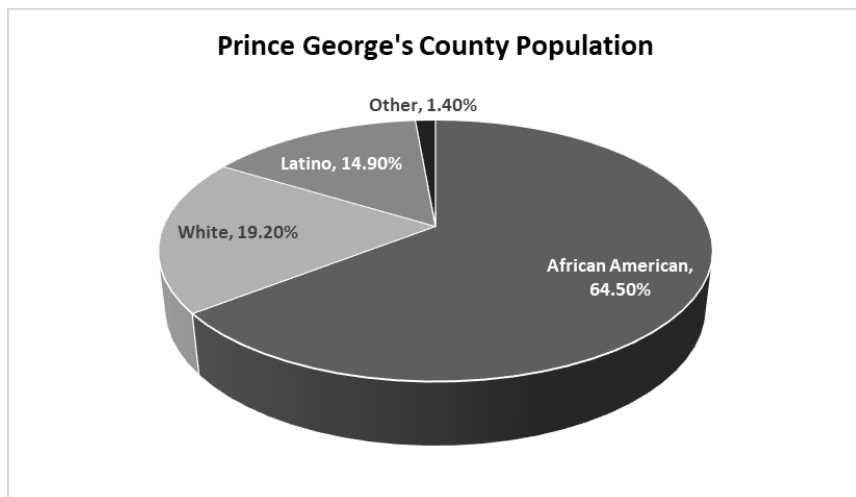


Figure 7: Prince George's County Population Demographics (United States Census 2010).